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Saturday, June 11, 2005

Mystery rash could postpone regatta

Some paddlers want racing officials to cancel or move the Keehi Lagoon race

By Diana Leone
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Something that has stung or bitten canoe paddlers in Keehi Lagoon in recent weeks might prompt a Hawaiian outrigger canoe racing association to cancel or move a regatta set for tomorrow.

For at least two weeks, some paddlers at Keehi Lagoon have reported getting red welts, like mosquito bites or a rash, after they have been in the lagoon water. Others say this has been a problem since at least January.

Officials with Hui Wa'a, one of two canoe-racing associations on Oahu, were to hold an emergency meeting today to decide what to do about tomorrow's regatta.

Some paddlers with Hui

Stinging or biting

Officials are looking into what is stinging or biting canoe paddlers in Keehi Lagoon in recent weeks.



Wa'a experienced the problem at its regatta at Keehi on May 29, and some paddlers with the Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association also were affected Sunday, said Sue Brown, a paddler with the Waikiki Beach Boys club and a plankton researcher at the University of Hawaii.



"I was in water (at Keehi) two weeks ago, and it didn't affect me," Brown said, "but by late afternoon some people were affected pretty badly. It seemed to have gotten worse as the day went on."

Particularly affected have been "holders," who get in the water to hold a canoe for the start of a race.

But even some paddlers who have been in the water only a few minutes, getting in and out of the canoe, have broken out in a rash, said Jen Romano, a coach for Keola O Ke Kai canoe club, which practices at Keehi.

"We don't know exactly what it is -- it's like water fleas," Romano said. "It bites your body where your clothes cling to you."

Romano said her husband got welts like mosquito bites under his arms, "but he said he didn't see the thing that's biting him."

Donna Moore, president of the North Shore Canoe Club, said yesterday that it was her understanding the state Health Department has known about the problem for several months.

Health Department spokeswoman Janice Okubo said yesterday that she does not know how long department officials have known about the problem.

The department's Clean Water Branch believes the breakouts might be caused by the spicules, or silicon skeletons, of dead porifera sponges, Okubo said.

"They're like small fiberglass fibers that float around and can irritate the skin," she said.

Plankton specialist Brown noted that "any time you get tiny

bites or stings (from being in sea water), people will generically call it 'sea lice,'" which could actually be any of a number of organisms.

"It's not uncommon to have things in water that come up a day or two and sting you or bite you," Brown said. However, this problem bears investigating since it has been occurring for weeks, she said.

Moore said both adult paddlers and parents of young paddlers have expressed doubt about racing at Keehi until the source of the problem is known. But Moore said association rules require each canoe club to participate in a certain number of regattas to retain its standing. So if the whole club does not go, it will be penalized.

That is why Moore predicted that club representatives will be pressing the association to move or cancel the race.

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